Global Learning and the Myth of Borders

Examining Theological Education and Librarianship through World-Systems Theory

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ABSTRACT In the last few years, the language of *globalism and borders* has been pervasive in the narratives of politics and social commentary. Despite the flurry of opinions, debates, and claims of "fake news," those who are practitioners in theological education broadly speaking, and theological librarianship, specifically, recognize the deep and profound reality of global education and the impact that it has on both domestic students and the international representation of students and faculty as one community of learners, practitioners, and seekers. In this paper, we will look at how the language of globalism has been expressed both in popular terms and theological terms, how the evocation of *borders and boundaries* is not a new idea but a dated trope reused throughout history for steering narrative claims, and how World-Systems theory enables a broader understanding of theological education and librarianship.

INTRODUCTION

In 1974 Immanuel Wallerstein published his seminal book *The Modern World System*, in which he outlined the basic components of what would later be called "World-Systems Theory"[1] by other scholars in fields as diverse as sociology, history, and anthropology. Wallerstein himself, however, insisted this was not *theory*, but *analysis*. Nonetheless, this assessment of the world in another distinctly articulated approach was something novel and important, because it afforded not simply

an evaluation of how the world was set up, but a re-evaluation of how the world was viewed through the prism of nation-state units that has dominated especially in *the West*.

World-Systems *analysis*, then, also coincides with boundary and border studies, which are themselves heuristic exercises in questioning both the meaning of one's self and homeland *and* the places from which we separate ourselves—those things that are distinct, different, and indicative of how we do *not* define ourselves, or rather in fact those things we define ourselves *against*. Perhaps this is one of the key problems with how borders, boundaries, and divisions are expressed in the current world, whether by designations of land and lines across barren earth and bodies of water, or by being in concert with the inventions that we've recognized in nations and states since the seventeenth century. But in terms of border studies, the recognition of these categories as more fluid than rigid has put an entirely new focus on what it really means to be a point of separation, division, and *apartness*. In fact, the complex nature of associating a "border" with a "wall" is in itself an assumption of this separation, which is driven by socio-political narratives of the state. Throughout history, despite the fact that borders and boundaries demarcated space, almost the entirety of global borders have been places of fluid commerce, interactive exchange, and combined human productivity and intercourse in all aspects of life. Far from being *divisive* spaces, borders and boundaries were designations of space that in reality were flexibly interwoven into the fabric of quotidian individual, familial, and community interactions.

As we consider what constitutes the language of "borders" and "boundaries," we must acknowledge that the majority of world boundaries, which separate nations, came into existence in the nineteenth century, precisely at the time when nations and nationalism were on the ascent and colonialism was in full swing. Looking at the field of border studies more closely, and how this discipline evolved into what it is today, Joshua Hagen offers an exemplary introduction to how this field developed and changed especially during the late twentieth century. He writes:

> As a distinct field of academic inquiry, border studies drew its initial impetus from geopolitical rivalries among European

> powers coinciding with rapid colonial expansion and devastating world wars during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As such, early border scholars generally focused on advancing the strategic interests of their home states pertaining to territorial claims and border demarcation. After 1945, however, scholars worked to disassociate their field from the narrow, prejudiced interests of their respective governments. As a result, border research tended to be rather descriptive, focusing on terminology and classification. This began to change around 1980—ironically, as some scholars, mostly from business and technology backgrounds, began predicting an imminent "borderless" world. In response, geographers and other social scientists developed new methodological and theoretical approaches for border studies. ... Despite its breadth and interdisciplinary nature, there are some general themes that run through early-21st-century border research. Most prominent is the understanding of borders as a process; that is, borders result from processes of bordering that differentiate among places, peoples, and jurisdictions.[2]

With such an evocation in mind, it makes us wonder not simply about the terms themselves—like "a borderless world"—but instead about the language and narrative that is pushed by various sides of the discussion. It would seem that invoking the language of a "borderless world" in contrast to the world "of borders" is to characterize the world of some utopia against the one of reality. There will always be borders, because there will always be a need by the modern nation to keep track of populations, to monitor movement, to stabilize people, and to control the masses—the very nature of state power.

This said, the dichotomy between the *physical world* and the *virtual world* is one which plays into what constitutes the new game of barriers, borders, and boundaries. We live in both, but the *physical world* is the one which has the most significant restrictions on how we move, live, and operate. The *virtual world* may have its own boundaries, but the freedom and flexibility of communications between and among all people around the globe thus affords us with unlimited opportunities—of course, in countries and designated nation-states where there is *not* censorship or control of distinct populations; most of us

can likely predict where those places are that don't have this kind of flexibility.

Globalism language has been around for a long time, but how it has been perceived in the last eighty years is distinct. We often see terms that are interchanged, though they have specifically different meanings, such as cosmopolitanism, internationalism, and most similar, *globalization.* Globalism is a term that is often described in political science as an extension of affairs across and beyond the boundaries of nations and nation-states; the Cambridge Dictionary defines it specifically as "the idea that events in one country cannot be separated from those in another and that economic and foreign policy should be planned in an international way."[3] Globalism is a term and idea that predates the pervasive nature of capitalist economies that are themselves global phenomena. In distinction to *globalism* is *globalization*, which the same dictionary defines as "the development of closer economic, cultural, and political relations among all the countries of the world as a result of travel and communication becoming easy."[4] A further definition includes "the way in which economies have been developing to operate together as one system."[5] Each definition includes the key component of worldwide interaction, but depending on the narrative of each definition, the descriptor could be either positive (global reach toward participation) or negative (global reach toward control), for example. According to the usage of the term "globalism" in the Google N-gram search, the word appeared in the early 1940s, and had for some time been used in negative terms by nativists in the United States, while the same language has reappeared in recent years with the same feeling of negativity spun by certain factions. Again, though, it depends on who is using (or weaponizing) the language for the purpose of understanding what globalism really means.

Now let us turn to the particular role that theological schools, seminaries, and their libraries have in the greater role of global learning, and how the notion of borders and boundaries plays in this complex relationship.

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND GLOBAL LEARNING

We are in a world now, more than ever, that has struck out at the concept of the global educational marketplace. The language of "global

theology," "global theological education," and "globalization" is well used throughout the field of theological and seminary education. The terms indicate a variety of things to a variety of people. And these distinctions have very different meanings when considering their origins and historical backgrounds.

In an article from 2015, in the *Journal on Lutheran Ethics*, J. Paul Rajashekar writes about some of the issues around the use of "globalization" language in the present time, and how it has both limitations and opportunities. He writes:

> The intensification of the globalization process in recent decades however has forced us to rethink our engagement with this reality with respect to theology and theological education. Robert Schreiter, years ago, wrote about "global flows" and "local logics" and identified four global flows: liberation, feminism, ecology and human rights (see Schreiter). These four flows, in his view, are important global/universal concerns that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. To this list, I would add interreligious/intercultural engagement as another important theme that has emerged as an universal issue.[6]

As members of theological communities, we are faced with a number of issues and questions, some pressing, some imperative, that have to deal with the whole vibrancy and existence of our own churches, religious organizations, denominations, and ultimately our communities themselves. That is why, for instance, if we are to look at Rajashekar's comments on Schreiter and the idea of "global flows"—namely, liberation, feminism, ecology, and human rights—these are certainly core ideas in both our theological schools or seminaries *and* the church itself. In turn, this sort of research and curricular focus then has its relationality to what the theological library must do in its collections and support of the institution and church.

We also look at what is being done in the cultivation of students in our theological institutions—those students who are already denominationally centered in a tradition and culture, and then seek a connection to these theological schools and institutions in Europe and the

United States. The question, in part then is "What are the ethical responsibilities of the institution and, by association, the libraries of these schools in cultivating and sustaining those who come from the *global context*?" We might initially say that the theological library provides services, but also jobs for many of those who come from other contexts. But what else, and how can this be cultivated to provide optimal support?

BORDERS, SPACES, AND THE DECOLONIZATION MOVEMENT

Why does the question of "the global" or "globalization" come into public discourse? Is this something that is solely dictated by isolationist and nationalist tropes and language? The theme for the present section that I want to discuss is about "borders" and the "construction of space"; the latter is important, because we often create space by cordoning it off, creating borders, or walls, or barriers. It is the contemporary debate that has run through the American political system in the last few years that has prompted and caused this conversation in many ways.

The common tropes of borders and separation of entities is constituted by how one nation is set against another—or all others, depending on how those places are seen, identified, and understood. One of the key models of World-Systems Theory is a critique of the way that the modern world is constructed and viewed. As Carlos A. Martínez Vela articulates this, as an assessment of Wallerstein's system, he notes:

> [Wallerstein] aimed at achieving "a clear conceptual break with theories of 'modernization' and thus provide a new theoretical paradigm to guide our investigations of the emergence and development of capitalism, industrialism, and national states" (Skocpol, 1977, p. 1075). Criticisms to modernization include (1) the reification of the nation-state as the sole unit of analysis, (2) assumption that all countries can follow only a single path of evolutionary development, (3) disregard of the world-historical development of transnational structures that constrain local and national development, (4) explaining in terms of ahistorical ideal types of "tradition" versus "modernity," which are elaborated and applied to national cases.[7]

The problem, in effect, is the idea of "the nation." As we are conditioned to think and believe that the only way to see the world is through the distinction of nations and nationalism, we fail to recognize the distinctions that existed before there were nation-states (an invention of the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648); but also, we fail to see the nuances of cultures today, situated within each and every person and their identities within their societal makeup—even in the examples of Native Americans or First Nations in our current surrounds here in Vancouver. For Wallerstein, the core of World-Systems is to deconstruct the assertion and hegemony of this narrative, the nation-state narrative, as much as this predominates because of international law prescriptions or guidelines governing citizenship, for example. These are superficial constructions that afford uniformity and a means of dictating functionality, but systems of human action, behavior, and ecologies are driven by a host of other factors. This notion, too, is what the second point expresses—that countries must follow a single path of evolutionary development. This, of course, cannot be further from the truth. Each and every country has its own developmental and evolutionary process that is based on countless factors and questions.

The same can be said about the evolutionary assumptions about theology, theological systems, architectures, and constructs that have perpetuated our understandings within the religious contexts of Western thought for centuries. There are, for certain, many kinds of boundaries that we put up—because of difference *and* similarities, because of appearances, shared beliefs, and national heroes—which is really a question of the narrative that we tell about ourselves in relation to others and to the past.

As we look at the distinctions of the World-Systems Theory analysis and the role that nations and nationalism have played in the greater assessment at hand, it should also be recognized that along with nations, the idea of *empires* also was part of the conversation. Both empires and nations had colonies, which projected and manipulated power throughout the world. The legacy of empire and colonialism is something that is still felt and experienced today and, with that, there are subsequent counter-movements in motion today which seek to *decolonize* the way the world operates. Appropriately, this is often called the *decolonization movement.* Part of this entails the question of "who

owns" or "controls" such notions, terms, language, and practices. Who owns the *narrative*, effectively? Wallerstein expresses the critique that *nationalism* and *nations* have dominated our ability to understand the structure of world systems as post-Westphalian units *exclusively*. That is to say that we have been conditioned to see the development and growth of the world in one way—not as something multivalent or multicultural—because of this coopting of expansive thinking by an emblematic problem that only sees nations and national growth. In some ways, this can be said of almost all that influences our ways of seeing such things as theology, history, and even ethics: because even the structures of our thinking have been colonized by western constructs. How often do we hear "German philosophy and theology" in distinction to "French mysticism," for example? Our categories presume that a "nation" must designate and qualify the meaning of that philosophy, theology, or mysticism, *rather* than something that is perhaps a bit more provincial, local, or even different by designations of gender, presentation, or thought itself—though it is presumed that *categories* themselves help us visualize, guide, and understand the world around us. In the twentieth century, though, it was with the profound distinctions and seismic shifts that occurred with thinkers like Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, and then James Cone, who pushed the boundaries of identifying the essence of philosophical theology with the character of the self—the identity of the culture of that author was shifted to the essence of both humanness *and* ethno-racial terms, in the case of James Cone. World-Systems Theory expressed itself in the form of a cultural system, rather than a nation or state system, and by viewing it through this lens the move toward a real decolonization of theology can be seen more clearly.

Decolonization too has been an expression of the response to all the colonial matrices and problems that have been put upon marginalized cultures, societies, and peoples. It emphasizes how certain systematic oppressions have been put into place and ways in which they can be treated and corrected by concerted efforts to make policies and practices equitable, fair, and just.

DEPENDENCY THEORY

The main point of *dependency theory* is one which acknowledges the long history of colonialism throughout the world. In effect, it is an

example of how we look at and acknowledge the role of the "core" and "periphery" relationship. If "core" represents those societies, countries, and nations which have wealth, prosperity, and control of capital, then "periphery" has been designated as those places that are often described as *un- or under-developed* but may in fact have very rich resources. Yet the relationship comes with a power dynamic, whereby the country that possesses the power (the "core") *seeks* and *reaps* the resources from the country which does not have the advantage of power (the "periphery"). How this fits the Marxist models is in its dynamics of power, and who or what exerts that very power over elements in the global marketplace, which can only be guided and manipulated, but never rise to any place of equilibrium. The acknowledgement of this may be present in some theological schools, libraries, and even pulpits. How we engage, though, is the important part—where we support this bibliographically or through digital resources, knowledgeable staff, and other means is integral. Recognizing the distinctions made on a global scale, including the "flows" of capital, information, communication, and education, while understanding the historical and contemporary meanings and outcomes of these "flows" in World-Systems is part of how we will best accommodate and engage future generations.

KNOWLEDGE MOVEMENT AND IDEA CAPITALISM

The value of information and knowledge has been around since the beginning of time. The old Roman expression *Scientia est potentia*—or "knowledge is power"—was not merely a simple expression taught in high school Latin classes. It had real meaning behind it. "Knowledge," however broadly defined and related to *information*, is that which can and will yield tremendous advantages to those who hold that information and knowledge. That power can be harnessed by the what, why, where, when, and how you possess that information and knowledge, whether that's a combination number on a lock, or a lottery number, or even the right answer to a game show or a trial cross examination—one word or phrase could have the potential to be worth a million dollars or zero dollars—all or nothing.

The question for us, as we touched upon in the last section, has to do with how we come to understand that there really is exceptional value

in *information, knowledge,* and *ideas*—these have often been described in terms of *information capital, knowledge capital,* and to a lesser extent *idea capital(ism).* These forms of "flows," as we have discussed above, can exist anywhere, but there are advantages to those with greater means of faster, broader distribution, which includes everything from control of radio and television stations to the debates around internet access and net neutrality. These concepts are not bound by nation states or borders. And in this day and age, we must be more cognizant of the roles played by the various actors, who dominate the global controls on information, knowledge, and ideas—from media operations, conglomerates, and big business to the democratized decentralization of individuals in Egypt, China, and the United States. At the same time, we need to realize that there are controls and censorship from some nations and state actors. But the overall theme for us is that the versatility of information, knowledge, and ideas as commodities has become far more relevant and important in the present age, and one which we as educators, administrators, and librarians must continue to be alert to.

THE ROLES OF THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS AND LIBRARIES?

What is the ethical responsibility of the theological school that must acknowledge its past as a mission-centered movement or as a product of nations, nation-states, and the colonial enterprise? Specifically, how should it understand and reconcile the circumstances of the present, where it seeks to recruit students, and to a lesser extent faculty, from around the globe, and how can an understanding of World-Systems analysis better equip those institutions for these challenges? The legacy of *core* and *periphery* remains with us, even if many of the structures have disappeared. Should we recognize the past, the truths and difficult expressions of colonial power that manifested in some of the inequalities that still drive this world or even the perpetuation of imbalanced political and economic power that is often described as a form of "democratization"?

Let us first step back a few moments and consider the place of World-Systems Theory in this conversation and how elements of WST can help us better understand the questions at hand. For example, we have seen that this approach and methodology have forced us to recon-

sider how certain elements of language, culture, society, ideas, and information are understood, broadly speaking, in respect to the long conditioning of social ideas. In WST we have seen that this conditioning has played out in the formulation of nation-state creation as the singular method of acknowledging the evolution and development of societies in the post-Westphalian world. If we are to take this methodology and apply it to *theology*, *ethics,* and even *church historical* processes, as well as those associated with the evolutions of libraries, the question might be reoriented to say that these Enlightenment-focused categories *must* also be developed in only one way—the Western Eurocentric process that created "all" categories. But this, we have seen since the mid-twentieth century, with deconstructionism and more recently *decolonization*, is no longer the case. Categories of theology, ethics, and church historical ideas may have been predominant, and languages like German, French, Italian, Latin, and English may have been categorically central to what was being taught in the European models, but closer examination in other cultural milieus shows us that there are other typological examples in a multiplicity of cultures around the world, especially within Christian history and theology.

Yet when we consider some of these ideas about how the development of language and terminologies and historical expressions have evolved or been manifest, are we saying that these are universals, or are we saying that we are in fact creating *new boundaries* of thinking, language, and human expression, which then prevent a more fluid and open communication? The Christian Church, broadly speaking, is a church that has a deep history in the idea of its missionary stance in the world and history. It is, then, necessary that the reflections that each and every Christian community has are those which seek to understand the relational history that has evolved out of the missionary historical context—even if the denomination in question is not an active missionary tradition. The expanse of what "mission" means in the Christian world(s) is very diverse and distinct and is one that is deeply involved in the definitional process of explicating the language of *borders* and *boundaries.* Why? Because within missional history, the idea of bringing people together into the community of the professed in one faith tradition or another already presumes that there are boundaries and borders between people *culturally*, but also *spiritually.*

The same for libraries—what are the historical traditions behind those things we consider in a library and their position in relation to WST? The theological library is an operation that underscores much in the way of assuming the beliefs and practices of the past: we are entrenched and committed to the preservation of both an historical legacy and the ways that information has been codified. Even when we discover that there are in fact *boundaries* that exist in the way that this information and knowledge was categorized more than a hundred years ago—by people like Dewey or Cutter or anyone else who designed the rubrics of bibliographic and library classification—because their biases, prejudices, and often limited and myopic ways of looking at the world, still influence and guide the way that we plan and organize and classify our own circumstances and worlds.

And so, even if we speak of *the myth of borders*, this expression is far more complex than what we may have initially suggested because there are myths about the way that a border exists and the role that it plays, but there are meanings to what border and boundary constitute. Some are porous and only supply meaning as delineating, rather than inhibiting. Some lines mark where a place ends and begins, just as a comma or period demarcates the flow of a sentence. And some boundaries are imagined—like imagined communities. They project something that may not actually be there, but that we and others have been conditioned to believe.

As we look out upon the world with its grand landscapes, big skies, and magnificent human diversity, we are also reminded of the grandiose narratives that often overtake our sensibilities to think clearly and act justly and with tempered resolve. The systems that make up this world possess great staying power; they influence how we think, how we see the world, and how we operate within it. But we must also pause now and again to consider the implications of these systems, of these structures, and how they often coerce us as unaware agents in the nation-state narrative. We must also be better stewards of the places we inhabit, our homes, our classes, our schools, our libraries, our communities, and our societies. Once we do this, the recognition of borders and boundaries will be recast as extensions of ourselves, where we come to meet and embrace the stranger, rather than rejecting them.

ENDNOTES

1 In general usage, the orthography includes a "dash," as in "World-Systems Theory," but if the term is used in passing, as in "there are world systems," it is left without a dash and expressed in lowercase.

2 Joshua Hagen, "Introduction," *Borders and Boundaries* (Oxford Bibliographies): https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199874002/obo-9780199874002-0056.xml

3 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/globalism

4 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/globalization

5 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/globalization

6 J. Paul Rajashekar, "Theological Education in an Era of Globalization: Some Critical Issues," *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 15.1 (Jan. 2015). https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1069

7 Carlos A. Martínez-Vela, "World Systems Theory," 2. http://web.mit.edu/esd.83/www/notebook/WorldSystem.pdf